

The Effect of a Gender Lens on the Political Socialization of Adolescent Girls

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Introduction

Summary of Problem

Despite recent gains in political enfranchisement for women, the United States, women remain underrepresented in political office. In the 115th Congress, women hold 19.4% of seats, including 21% of seats in the Senate and 19.1% of seats in the House of Representatives. On the state level, women hold 23.7% of statewide elective executive office positions. Representation for women of color is even lower; of the 21 women in the US Senate, only 4 are women of color, and of the 83 women in the House of Representatives, only 34 are women of color. ¹

Research Questions

Why are women underrepresented in political office?
What factors contribute to the low frequency of women that hold public office?

Hypotheses

One factor contributing to the low representation of women in public office is the socialization of girls to consider themselves unfit for politics. Engaging adolescent girls in discussions about politics will encourage them to consider a career in politics. Engaging adolescent girls in discussions about politics with a gender lens will have an increased effect on the likelihood that they will consider a career in politics.

Method

Subjects

The subjects were sixth grade students at Kilbourne Middle School in the Worthington City Schools District in Worthington, Ohio. There were nine students in the control group and nine students in the experimental group. Political participation is a habit that is shaped in life; adolescent girls were chosen for this study because they are at the beginning of their political socialization and would thus display large changes in political self-esteem. ²

This study has Institutional Review Board approval for the use of human subjects.

Procedures

All participants completed a pre-test with qualitative and quantitative questions to assess their level of political consciousness prior to the beginning of the study. The pre-tests were coded with random numbers, which students used in place of their names.

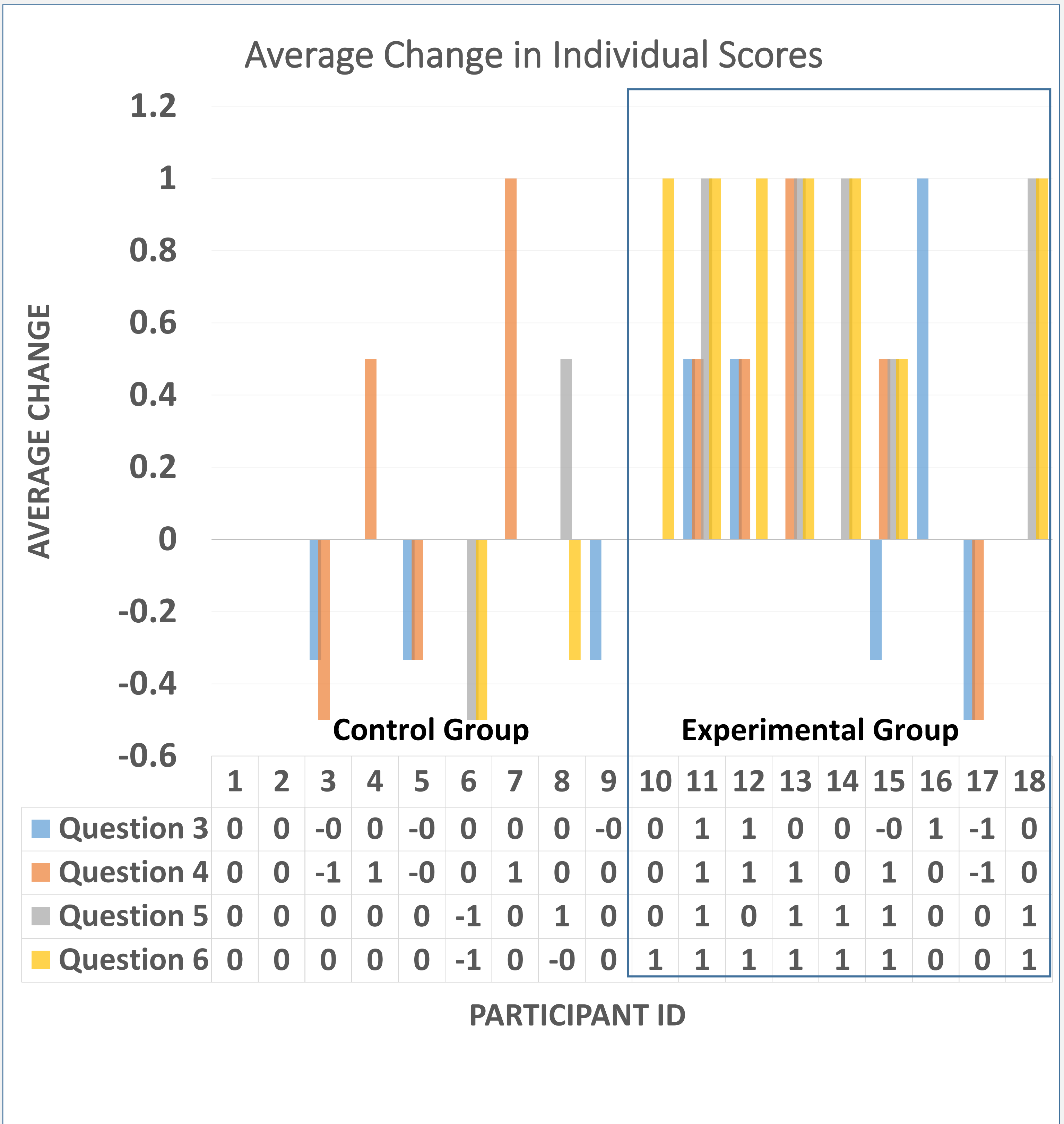
One class was randomly determined to be the control group. Before each of six seminar discussions, participants in both groups read a news article about the day’s discussion topic. The discussion topics were broad topic headings relating to current national and international events. Both the control and experimental groups read articles about the same discussion topic, but the articles read by the control group were specifically chosen to add a gender lens to the discussion topic.

All participants completed a post-test with the same format as the pre-test to measure the change between pre- and post-program responses.

Data Analysis

- Descriptive statistics
- Comparison of means between and within classes
- Two-tailed t-test
- Graphical analysis

Findings



Based on what you know about yourself now, how qualified do you feel that you would be in the future to have a job in which you could influence

Q3. Local politics?

Q4. State politics?

Q5. National politics?

Q6. International politics?

- Not qualified
- Somewhat qualified
- Very qualified

The average change in individual response for each question was higher for students in the experimental group than in the control group.

Conclusions

Conclusions

- The evaluation of pre-test mean responses and post-test mean responses within the experimental group suggested that, as a result of the treatment, participants in the experimental group were significantly more likely to consider themselves capable of holding a job in the future that could influence national or international politics.
- Evaluation of post-test means between classes suggested that participants in the experimental group were also significantly more likely than their counterparts in the control group to consider themselves capable of holding a job in the future that could influence national or international politics as a result of the treatment.

Insights

- Including a gender lens in political discussion changes the way that adolescent girls feel about themselves and their future capacities to be involved in political activity. By focusing on female political figures, including visible female candidates and political actors, girls are increasingly likely to believe that they will be capable of influencing political events.

Recommendations

- Educators and parents must consider the extent to which gender norms and implicit biases influence the manner in which they nurture young girls.
- Educators and parents can apply a gender lens to political discussion in order to socialize young girls to mature into women with strong political self-esteem.

Limitations

- Data only encompasses responses from 18 students and does not account for other variables including socioeconomic background.
- Lack of data on propensity to engage in political discussion at home.
- Data only reports expectations of future employment in politics, not any other forms of political engagement.

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- ² Quintelier, Ellen. “Engaging Adolescents in Politics: The Longitudinal Effect of Political Socialization Agents.” Youth & Society. 2015. Vol. 47. Web. 23 Dec. 2014.